

Life, Rebuilding by alby_mangroves

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Nancy's heart is pounding.

Life, Rebuilding

Author's Note:

- For [xyai](#).

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Underage drinking tag: Characters are under 21 which is the legal drinking age in Indiana in 1983.

Nancy doesn't know if it's sap or if the tree's bleeding but it's slimy, disgusting, and it's all over her and she's going to have to burn her clothes, slough her skin off. She's never going to feel clean again.

She presses her face to Jonathan's neck. They're panting like they've just run for miles. Her eyes are wide open because the trees are different in there, it's snowing ash and decay in there, but not here, not *here* , and Nancy doesn't want to close her eyes, maybe not ever.

Nancy presses closer and Jonathan flinches - he's very cold, shivering, but not as cold as her nose when she jams it into his neck. He smells sweaty and a little stale, like maybe he hasn't washed his hair in a while. He smells very, very human and real and he's a solid warmth to lean against. He's murmuring nonsense in her ear and Nancy wraps her arms about him, digs her fingers into him and holds on, just breathing.



“Are you awake?”

Nancy is. Nancy thinks she might never really sleep again. Her room feels wrong, surreal, brightly lit at three in the morning, all her lamps switched on. It's like she's seeing it for the very first time: her posters, her books, her closetful of pretty clothes. The room feels like it's

waiting for her to fall asleep so it can do whatever it does when she isn't awake to see it.

Behind her, the bed dips a little. No big deal, just Jonathan shifting around, getting comfortable. On her bed. Jonathan Byers is on her bed.

"Nancy?" Jonathan whispers. If Nancy turned her head just a little, she'd see him lying next to her, curled up on top of her comforter. She imagines him there, a curved lick of black paint on a candy-pink wall.

"Yeah," she whispers back.

"I really am sorry about the pictures. I know I already said, but I am. Sorry."

The pictures feel like a lifetime ago. Her whole life feels like a lifetime ago. Yesterday, Steve Harrington kissed her at her locker in front of the whole school. Yesterday she was annoyed that her favorite nail polish had dried up and went on clumpy. Nancy tucks her fists up under her chin.

"You looked like you really knew what you were doing. In the dark room," she says.

Jonathan's hands had moved so knowingly around the equipment, but not like he was showing off, just coaxing an image of Barb from a wet sheet of blank paper like it was nothing at all. It was kind of amazing to watch.

"Yeah, well. You really looked like you knew your way around that gun, so."

Nancy huffs a laugh. "I guess we all have our talents," she says, not thinking of Barb, not thinking of monsters, not thinking of other worlds just a thin skin away. The gun had felt pretty good in her hand. A good, solid weight.

"Yeah," Jonathan sighs.

It's so quiet this time of the night. Morning. Whatever. She'd never

realised before. When she stayed up late before, it was usually with Barb or other friends at a slumber party and it was never quiet, not like this. The house is a vacuum of sound, like a tomb.

It's been long enough for Nancy to think Jonathan's fallen asleep, when he clears his throat. "You kissed him yet?"

Nancy blinks, turns over to face Jonathan and he's red, red as a beet in the warm glow of her lamp. "What?"

"Steve," Jonathan says, after a moment. "Did you—"

"Yes," Nancy says, flushing hot. Did she ever.

"How— uh." Jonathan's throat clicks on a swallow. "How was it?"

Jonathan won't look her in the eye. His eyes dart all around the room, landing anywhere except on Nancy's face, skittish and hurt in advance, anticipating her reaction. It takes her a moment. A good, long moment.

Finally Nancy whispers, "You want to know what it's like to kiss Steve?"

He looks like he's wishing the earth would swallow him up but he finally meets her eyes, and she sees it then, the moment where his toes find the ledge and he decides to leap.

"He used to look at me sometimes." Jonathan snorts under his breath, and his brows knit together in a quiet sort of agony. "I know because I was always looking at him first. I used to think... I don't know. It's stupid."

Nancy watches the feelings flicker over Jonathan's face, his bangs not falling into his dark eyes for once. He looks like he's having several emotions at once. Nancy's eyes drop to his mouth. What would that be like, exactly, two boys kissing?

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Slowly, so he can see her coming and pull away if he wants to, she dips her head and presses her mouth to Jonathan's.

He doesn't move, doesn't kiss back for a moment, frozen, but then he does, so lightly, and he's shivering like a foal on its first legs, breath coming fast and stuttery. Nancy slides her hand under his head like she's the taller one. She is taller like this, Jonathan lying on her bed and Nancy poised over him, her hair a damp, dark curtain around them.

She holds him still and gives him kiss after kiss after kiss, slanting their mouths together this way and that. His lips are so soft. She leads and he follows, chasing her mouth, letting her hold him still. She keeps it sweet, just a little kitten lick to his bottom lip as she pulls away, to tease him a little, playing at being Steve, confident and brash and gorgeous.

Jonathan tracks her movement with glazed, blown eyes. His mouth is parted. Red. It's so soft. She kisses him again, and this time when she pulls away, his eyes are closed. He licks his lips.

"It's a little like that," she says, and slides their fingers together.



"It wasn't like that," she tells Steve, and means it; it *wasn't* like that. It's not like they can say anything about the monster, who'd even believe it? And the kiss? Well. Steve won't understand that he was as much in the room as she and Jonathan were.

And Jonathan, quiet, respectful Jonathan with his big secret, is vibrating with nerves right behind her. Nancy's not sure which of Steve's horrible slurs finally gets to him, and anyway, when did she come to care about him, want to protect him? But she does, and she's shocked at Steve, can't believe he'd do this, can't believe he'd stoop

this low.

But in the end, it doesn't matter, they were always going to punch each other's lights out.

"For love," says the receptionist at the police station, and Nancy wants to laugh. It's for love all right.

Maybe she should feel jealous, upset with Jonathan. She doesn't know why she isn't. She holds the icepack to his face and feels nothing but heartsick for him, for all three of them. There's sadness and disappointment with Steve, with those bright red letters on the movie theatre billboard, with herself, for even now hoping that Steve will come around. That he'll apologise for being such an asshole.

Except that when Steve finally comes around, it's not for her, it's for Jonathan. And maybe all those times when Steve caught Jonathan looking it's because they were really looking at each other after all.

There's a jolt of something deeply unsettling, something dark and thrilling low down in her belly when Steve stands up with them, when they take each other's hands to fight, and flee, and survive.

It's kinda funny, Nancy thinks, that it takes a monster for them to get on the same wavelength; she and Jonathan have cut their hands and Steve's face is a mess and they all bleed together before the gateway to hell, a pagan pact if ever there was one.



It's Thanksgiving before she unpicks the three-string knot.

The days following the monster hunt rush by in a blur. Nancy sleepwalks through school. It's the absence of Barb that's a constant reminder that it all really happened, otherwise, with the way everyone's acting, it would be easy to pretend that nothing did. Bury it under the proverbial rug—in this case the entire town—and

continue on. The whole of Hawkins seems to be doing it, everyone just walking around like a whole bunch of people didn't mysteriously die or disappear right under their noses.

The theater sign has been cleaned. Steve looks sheepish when she mentions it. Carol and Tommy are ignoring her and Steve so completely that it's like they never knew each other. The first couple of days are pretty tense, Steve's always looking for them, worrying, but they never so much as look at him and eventually he stops walking around with his shoulders around his ears like a spooked dog.

Jonathan's conspicuously absent for a week and nobody thinks anything of it, mostly because nobody thinks about Jonathan at all. He's always been a ghost. It's wrong.

"Hey Jonathan," Nancy says one evening, after Joyce Byers puts him on the phone.

"Nancy?" Jonathan says, and it's a little heartbreaking how surprised he is. Nancy clears her throat.

"So listen, I'm at Steve's. We're wondering if you want to come over?"

"Oh, okay. Really? I mean, is everything all right?"

Nancy smiles at the hesitation, the concern in his voice. "Yes. Yeah, of course. Just. I thought the three of us could talk. I guess I need to talk to someone who understands, you know? I feel like everyone's just—"

"—already forgotten?" Jonathan interrupts. "Yeah. I know what you mean."



They're at Steve's house, in Steve's room. It's very still outside, everything muffled by the early snowfall. The garden lights look like displaced moons with fuzzy haloes. Nancy can't see the pool from here but knowing it's out there is enough.

"So, are you really okay?" Jonathan says, sitting down beside her on Steve's bed. Nancy nods. They're waiting for Steve to come back from downstairs, where he'd gone to fetch some snacks. Nancy's all right. Nancy's just fine, and then her heart climbs into her throat and the words are right there with it, crowding into her mouth.

"I think about Barb being out there all alone," she says, hot behind her eyes. She fists her hands into her sweater and waits it out, waits for it to pass.

"I'm sorry about what happened to her," Jonathan says eventually, and his voice breaks a little, like he's been beating himself up about it. Like he could have prevented it or something.

"We never would have known," Nancy says, pausing when Steve comes in, balancing a tray and a couple of boxes of crackers under his arm. He has beer. Of course he has beer. "We'd never have known what happened to Barb or Will if you didn't take those pictures. That thing would still be out there."

"Yeah," Steve says, putting the tray and beer down on the floor and sinking down next to it. "We should really be thanking you for that. I mean, you're still a pervert, but—"

Nancy beans him with a pillow and Steve goes down giggling, t-shirt rolled up his stomach, a pale slice of skin. She catches Jonathan smiling, pink roses on his cheeks, and then he catches her catching him and his bangs fall into his eyes as he looks away.

Despite Steve's efforts to the contrary, they drink the beer from glasses this time, like civilised people.

After a while, Nancy settles down on the floor next to Steve, and it's nice, they're just talking and drinking. It feels very . . . grown up. It feels like they're older, if not on the outside then maybe on the inside, like it's a state of mind, maybe. Like they've come through a

baptism of fire and gotten singed a little, they're a little blackened, but they're here. They're alive.

The darkness recedes, powerless when they're together and Nancy's happy, and Jonathan's smiling down at them, at her and Steve sitting on the floor. Everything's glowing like warmed-up honey, soft and sweet, the whole room caught for posterity in an amber drop.

It feels right to straddle Steve, press his shoulders into the bed they're sitting against. It feels perfect to kiss him like that, slow and deep and a little biting, making Steve groan, making him pay attention.

Jonathan stiffens beside them, makes to get up, but Nancy wraps her hand around Jonathan's wrist and holds him there, half out of his seat, sliding her grip down until she can thread her fingers between his.

When she pulls on his hand, he lets her tug him down to the floor, sitting down softly beside them, awkward and stiff.

Nancy glances at him while she kisses Steve and he's red, so red, and she licks Steve's mouth just to watch Jonathan's chin drop, watch his eyes glaze and follow the movement of their tongues meeting.

She tugs him even closer until his shoulder presses into Steve's and drops kisses over Steve's cheek until she's at his ear, whispering. When Steve's hand finds theirs, the bottom drops out of her stomach. She loosens her fingers and gently slides them out, until Jonathan and Steve are holding hands and she can sit back and watch them look at how their fingers fit together. Her heart is pounding so hard she can barely think.

"Kiss him," she says, to either or both of them, and time slows, the amber thickening, trapping the moment when they come together, heads tilting a little, nose tips touching.

Jonathan's eyes are closed but Steve's are open right until the moment their lips touch, sticking dryly, coming apart and together again in small, tentative kisses that stop Nancy's breath. It's awkward and fumbling, so *new*, like first ever kisses when you're thirteen and it kicks out your knees and makes your head soar, and Nancy aches for

them.

She lifts up off Steve's lap a little so they can turn to each other and then they're kissing, really kissing, Jonathan's hands skimming up Steve's arms and Steve sinking his fingers into Jonathan's hair, taking Jonathan's face in his hands. God, they're gorgeous, she wants to touch them both so she does, putting her hands on their shoulders, their arms.

They part, and Steve looks at her with huge eyes like he's just realised what they've done. Jonathan's open-mouthed, shocked and they're still holding hands.

"What's. I'm. What," Steve says, and Nancy ducks in to kiss him, too, then gently presses her lips to the corner of Jonathan's mouth until she has both sets of eyes trained on her.

"I don't know what. But it feels good," she says, looking between them. "Doesn't it? I think it could be really good."

Jonathan wrestles with an idea for a moment, and eventually says, "Are you sure about this?" But he's not looked away from Steve's reddened lips, not once, and Nancy's heartbeat picks up, blood rushing past her ears. *God.*

Steve's mouth slowly unfurls in a crooked smile, the one she likes best. He looks at Jonathan, then leans in to kiss him again, just a sweet peck, a little teasing lick over Jonathan's bottom lip, coaxing Jonathan's face to curl up in a smile, too, eyes fluttering shut, lashes skimming black shadows on his cheeks.

And weeks later, at Christmas, Jonathan comes to her house to collect his brother. They're not alone, but it's all right, Nancy presents her boyfriend's boyfriend with a gift which is not really a gift, and presses a sweet, chaste kiss to his cheek along with a few whispered words to make him flush hot before he says goodnight.

